Shared Visions

A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center

— The people who bring you ***Connections*** *—*

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Leaps of Faith

by Gregory Darr
Mercy Corps, Maryknoll Mission Association of the Faithful, and Catholic Volunteers in Florida

I met Joe, an elderly homeless man, towards the end of my first week as a lay volunteer in an inner city shelter. I was new to this kind of work, and a bit uncomfortable. Before then, shelters were, to me, places where I dropped off food and clothing and then departed in a hurry. I didn't hang around long because I couldn't find the words to bridge the social chasm which seemed to exist between me and the destitute who stayed there. I figured a quick smile and an armful of food would acquit me of my Christian duty. A few words of thanks chased me out the door.

Not this year. Now I was committed, for the next few months, to spending several evenings a week with about forty men who wandered in at the end of a long day on Philadelphia's winter streets. Our shelter was located on one floor of a ramshackle old building which looked just about as destitute as its occupants. It creaked and groaned as you walked its one long, narrow hallway. Mattresses spilled out of darkened rooms filled with beds, piles of old clothing and, at night, tired men. Yet, on many bitterly cold nights, these hallway mattresses too were occupied by men fleeing the cold. It looked like a rundown indoor urban campground.

That first week, I found Joe sitting on a wooden chair at the end of the hallway. He was hunched over a thick book. From a distance, Joe looked just like several of the other men there — a long grey beard, unkempt thatch of grey hair, a face creased and weather-beaten, as old as the cracked and faded facades of our poor neighborhood. He was wearing a black sweater poked with holes, a sweater which I would see him wearing for the next several months. Near his feet was a box

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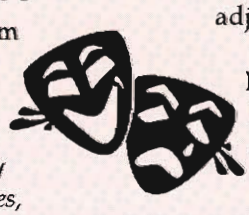
In this issue: Creative Confusion

"Best experience of my life! What am I doing?" "My community is great! Why am I living with these strangers?"

The beginning of the year for volunteers is full of confusing and conflicting thoughts. Many volunteers feel this way, so we have activities, stories and reflections to help you process these thoughts!



Read articles by former volunteers *Gregory Darr* and *Mona Tillman* who share their initial experiences of adjustment when they volunteered!

How much do you know about your community? Find out through the "*Web of Connections,*" by "*Taking a Hike,*" or by "*Cutting it out.*"

Also, a *Biblical Reflection* on Jesus bridging gaps during his own adjustment to public life.

Miracles of God's Love

by Mona Tillman
Cabrini Mission Corps

A huge relief swept over me as I sat down in my assigned seat. I was finally on my way to Argentina and there was no turning back. It all seemed like such a dream. I would be spending the next year and a half at Casa del Niño, a home for over 600 abandoned children and single mothers. Before I left, many had asked if I was ready. Ready? To leave behind my family and friends to go to a far off country where I knew no one and only spoke a little of the language? Definitely not, but my heart was ready.

At one orientation the Sisters had told us we would be "turned inside out." Here I thought they were just exaggerating. Oh boy, was I mistaken; everything was so different. The Spanish that I had slaved to learn in Mexico was very different from the Castellano of the Argentines. The children constantly asked me why I was speaking to them in English when I was actually talking to them in Spanish; they just couldn't understand me. The food made me sick, the bugs were everywhere and if that wasn't bad enough, I was told daily, "You're fat." (Talk about culture shock! I was beginning to wonder what kind of insanity had gotten me on that plane in the first place.) And although I struggled with all of this, the poverty is what shocked me the most.

"Talk about culture shock! I was beginning to wonder what kind of insanity had gotten me on that plane in the first place!"

There were children everywhere, lots of them, but for the first time in my life I was afraid to touch them. I love children, but these children were just so dirty and smelly. They would come running to me saying, "Monita, give me a kiss" and I would frantically search for a clean spot on their face. Needless to say, I prayed

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of old books which someone had donated earlier in the week.

As I approached Joe, I noticed that he was reading Tolstoy's "War and Peace." Amazed that this old homeless man was deep into a difficult classic, I dropped a few words in that "social chasm" between us and asked Joe how he liked the book. Joe looked up at me and, with a twinkle in his eye, replied, "Well, I find Tolstoy to be satisfactory but Dostoyevsky, now there's a writer!" For the next three hours, Joe unfolded his opinions of 19th Century Russian literature, history and contemporary politics. Our conversation was sprinkled with anecdotes, jokes and finished only with the end of my shift. We picked it up again many times over the next several months, both on the streets where I found Joe and in the shelter where I worked.

Joe was only the first of many of our shelter residents who would change my life that year. Though no one else shared his interest in Russian literature, others brought me their own hobbies and heartbreaks. Among them was Dennis, who read me his poetry and sought my criticism; Ron, who gave me tips on how to survive on the streets; and Andrew, who, with a fifth or more of gin in his system, was still a formidable chess opponent.

"...though the chasms which divide us are often born of our fears, sometimes it does take a leap of faith to overcome them."

I came into my volunteer experience mindful of a "social chasm," a canyon of differences between my Midwest middle-class upbringing and the chronically homeless men of inner city Philadelphia. Early on, however, these men helped me to realize that this chasm could not be bridged by tossing food, clothing and best wishes to the other side. No, someone would have to make a step into the void. And, if this experience was going to mean anything to me, I was going to have to be that "someone."

Looking back now, it's amazing to me how much fear I felt in taking that step to get to know these men. What was I afraid of? Did I think their problems would become mine? Was I risking a commitment for which I was unprepared? Was I afraid that these men would see that I offered no answers, no useful strategies for their lives, no sense of where they came from and the problems that they faced? That step seemed like a leap of faith which would leave me broken and bleeding on the rocks below.

But despite myself, I made a few pathetically small but meaningful steps -- a smile here, a comment there, a shared joke, a helpful favor. All it took, more or less, was one small step for me to fall into the hands of a special group of men and to realize that there was no physical chasm between us, just my fears. And most of these fears were based on prejudices born of ignorance.

I learned that these men were certainly not destitute of human dignity, intelligence, compassion and love. They were "destitute" only in the sense that it was we who had drawn a "social chasm" among ourselves, leaving our brothers and sisters abandoned to the problems of mental illness, chemical dependency and unjust economics which we would rather not face.

I learned too that, though the "chasms" which divide us are often born of our fears, sometimes it does take a leap of faith to overcome them. It's a time of adjustment that happens to many volunteers when we realize that charity is not enough. We have to take a few hands, risk sharing ourselves, and stand once again on the same ground in life. There's no guarantee that we're going to make the leap standing on both feet. Being broken is a very real possibility. My heart was broken several times that year by men whose lives seemed to spin fatally out of control. But I believe that God empowers us to make that leap of faith, if only to discover that, perhaps in our brokenness, we are healed by those whom we seek to heal.

I think it was Dostoyevsky who said that the world will be saved by beauty. If so, my life was saved in part by a homeless man whose eyes twinkled amidst a creased face, food-stained beard and frayed black sweater. Beauty not as the world understands it, not as we expect it, but as God gives generously.

Thanks, Joe. +

entrees

Burrito Blues☹:

How to spice up your rice & beans

- Add onion and garlic to the rice as it boils; and/ or boil rice in chicken or vegetable broth!
- Put spinach, rice, black beans and a little cheese in a tortilla for a great wrap!
- Steam your tortillas by first wrapping them in a cloth and placing them on a veggie steamer rack in a pot with a little hot water (or heat in oven if you don't have a rack).
- Make quesadillas for a change! Use 2 tortillas and fry them with cheese, veggies, eggs or beans in between.

Reflection questions for Gregory's article:

1. Greg speaks about a "social chasm," a "canyon" of differences between his middle-class upbringing and the chronically homeless men of the inner city. What are some of the differences between your background and the background of the people you serve?

2. What are some stereotypes you had before about the population with which you are now working?

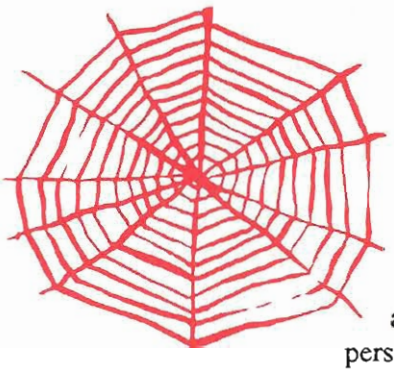
3. Think of someone in your life who at first seemed peripheral or unimportant, and who later became a "real" person for you. What are some of the things that made a difference in your relationship? Describe them.

Creative Confusion:
How to deal with the mixed feelings you may be experiencing

As a lot of programs start up in the Fall, many volunteers are probably feeling **excited**, yet **apprehensive** and **confused** about what exactly they are supposed to be doing. On one hand, you may **miss home** but on the other hand, you are being **exposed** to so many wonderful things. It is completely **normal** to feel this "schizophrenia" of sorts.

And, YES, there are ways to help you deal with the gamut of feelings you may be experiencing. One of the most creative ways to deal with them is to just talk about them! The following activities are a base to think about and discuss both the good and the bad that comes with this confusion.

Try one or more of the activities on these two pages. Use them with your housemates, your work community or as a personal, prayerful reflection in order to benefit from this crazy time.



The Web of Connections

This activity is good for about 4-8 people. We suggest having everyone sit in a circle in a comfortable atmosphere. Randomly pick anyone to start, and have her/him read the first question out loud. Starting with the person to the reader's right, each person will answer the question briefly. There is no discussion, only answers. And there is no such thing as an incorrect answer. It is okay for people to interpret the question differently. After the person who asked the question has answered, pass the list on to the next person to his or her right. Answering proceeds around the circle until all the questions are finished. So, please take a moment to get physically comfortable and spiritually centered... and enjoy getting to know each other better!

- How many people are in your family (names & birth order)?
- What is your favorite time of year?
- What is the furthest you have been away from home?
- Who do you currently miss the most?
- Who inspires you?
- Who is your favorite person to talk to?
- Who is someone in your life that has really listened to you?
- What do you consider one of your gifts from God?
- What has been the hardest good-bye in the past year?
- What energizes you?
- What is a risk you have taken in life?
- What do you think your parent(s) are doing right now?
- What was the hardest thing to leave behind?
- What drains you of your energy?
- What have you learned about yourself in the past 6 months?
- What is a recent sign of God's presence in your life?
- What is something you are really proud of?
- What answer has surprised you the most?
- What question would you like to ask the whole group?
- Who have you learned the most about?
- What question would you like to have explained further?
- Who in the group shared your perceptions?
- What is one hope you have for this year?

Don't shake off those cobwebs.... Add to them!

Following the same format as the Web of Connections, have everyone write two or three questions like those above and put them in a basket. Take turns pulling out and asking the new questions. Invite friends or support people to join you this time.

Former Volunteers: Try these activities (or others that you remember from your volunteer year) with your current housemates, family or friends!

Take turns sharing your collages with each other!

No, it's not a flashback to your brother and sister yelling at you... it's just an activity. Often it is hard to express the differences between where you are now (physically and emotionally) and what you are missing from being away from home. In order to help you, use old magazines and newspapers that you can cut up to express yourself. Have each person make a collage representing each section:

- What am I missing most ...about my family? ...about my friends? ...about "home?"
- What are some gaps I am feeling that keep me apart from ...my co-workers? ...the people I am serving? ...my community?
- What are some positive things I am feeling right now that help me bridge those gaps?

Take a Hike!

Not literally... *but you can take your own path and use this activity as guided imagery, a tool for journaling, a topic for discussion, or an art project for your community to pictorially map out this "hike." Discuss your hike together when you all come down from Volunteer Mountain. Have a good time and happy hiking!*

You are getting ready for a hike up Volunteer Mountain. You throw on your pack, a little heavy but comfortable. Your water bottles are full, your hiking boots are broken in and you are psyched for this trip!
What "gear" did you bring with you? What is some extra baggage you brought along? What do you need for survival of your volunteer experience?

The beginning of your hike is going great! There is flat terrain as far as you can see, it is a beautiful day, and you have just had a Power Bar and are FULL of energy.
When have you felt low in energy? What is your Power Bar that helps you through your days?

The day starts getting long, and your energy is fading as you start going UPHILL.
What are some hills -- challenges and/or hard work -- you are dealing with?

You are struggling up a steep incline and only watching the ground. Each foot takes a grueling step in front of the other. You notice your feet are starting to sink into the ground and you look up only to see -- a RIVER! You decide to follow the river upstream rather than finding a way to cross.
What are you tolerating right now that you have no desire to cross and would rather ignore until this problem goes away?

As you continue up this steep hill, you find yourself more and more exhausted, so you decide to take a rest. You lean against a tree, drink some water and start day dreaming....
Who do you wish was on this hike with you? If you could be anywhere in the world right now, where would you like to be?

You are feeling rested and continue up the mountain for the next few hours. The trees start clearing, the hill is now a bunch of rocks you are scrambling up. And soon enough, you come to the summit of the mountain -- with a beautiful view.
What do you see as the summit of your volunteer experience? When do you hope to be there?

"Miracles..." continued from page 1

every day that I would be able to someday love them without being so grossed out.

Our lay community was struggling and I began to feel even more isolated and alone. I felt as if I didn't have anyone I could turn to and it was too expensive to call home. There were some days that I could feel my happiness just literally draining out of me and there was nothing I could do to stop it from happening. Within my own head I would call out to God but God never answered me.

"There were some days that I could feel my happiness just literally draining out of me..."

One day just as I was leaving "my kids' " house (a group of about 20 rug rats who had kind of adopted me), I heard a mom begin to hit one of my girls. I heard the thumps and then Isabel's screams; it seemed to go on forever. As I stood frozen with tears rolling down my face, I too was screaming. Screaming silently at God, "Where are you? How can you allow this to happen to Isabel? She is just a child! I believed in you and in your love for little children. Jesus, you may have suffered on the cross but even you had a mother who held you when you were sad and protected you. A mother who loved you unconditionally. But what about these children of the Casa del Niño, what do they have? Where is their love and mercy?"

I was so angry and frustrated it felt like the world was shattering around me and being pulled out from underneath me. Everything that I had believed in for the past 26 years was gone and I no longer knew what to believe in or how to go on.

Our little community began to blossom and I found comfort and support in our new found friendships. Cabrini Mission Corps (CMC) was also very understanding and supportive and always reminded me to be patient with myself and to go slow. One day I received a letter from the director of CMC. She wrote, "Mona, God is there in that poverty at the Casa and with those children. You must look at them as to what they have. Despite their poverty, they have richness of another kind. You must look and find these. Be still and hear what God has to say to you."

I began to look and I began to listen and she was right. The more time I spent with the children, the happier they seemed. Their sparkling eyes and bright smiles shone beyond their torn shoes, worn clothes and dirty faces. They were happy, really happy, and before long I started to feel whole again. They followed me everywhere and there was no way to escape, but I didn't even want to. They bombarded me daily with hugs and kisses and my heart soared whenever I heard their laughter and playfulness.

"I still had questions, but every day I felt loved by God through the precious children of Casa del Niño."

As time went by, I felt happy but I still had so many questions and doubts. Father John was my first friend in Argentina and to him I poured out my soul. He was always so compassionate and understanding and he never once judged. As usual, I was talking his ear off trying to find some peace in all my confusion. I told him that I was just like doubting Thomas. I couldn't believe unless I could see God for myself. Father John sent me into a quiet room to read the gospel of doubting Thomas. I remember feeling cynical after I finished reading it and saying to God, "Well, that's just great but I don't have you to touch and see. Thomas had you, he was able to touch you and the wounds in your hands and in your side. But what do I have?" And then something actually happened, within my own head I heard, "Isabel and the children of Casa del Niño are my wounds and by touching them you will see me."

I still can't explain how it happened but after that experience I felt very much at peace. I still had questions, but every day I felt loved by God through the precious children of Casa del Niño. It's like my dear friend Arantza once said, "To live at the Casa del Niño is to live in a miracle." And although I am no longer in Argentina, the miracle of Casa del Niño continues on in my heart.

Con amor Mona (La Monita) ┼

Reflection questions for Mona's article:

1. Volunteers often experience some sort of culture shock in the first few months of their term of service. Mona described the food which had made her sick and the bugs that were everywhere. What are some ways you are suffering from cultural differences?

2. Some cultures may be more up front and blunt or more subtle; they may praise you as a volunteer or see you as a "rich kid" who couldn't possibly understand; they may see you as an "East Coaster" who won't take the time to listen; they may see you as "fat" or "phat" despite your actual physical shape or style. In what ways, if any, do you feel you have been stereotyped?

3. Mona was frustrated with the abuse and poverty suffered by the Argentine children. Have you witnessed some frustrations of injustice? What are they? How can you work for the resolution of injustice (not works of mercy...)?

4. With prayerful reflection, Mona saw herself as a doubting Thomas. Are there some ways in which you experience Christ as "distant" or "hiding" from you in your volunteer experience? How so?

A Biblical Reflection: Bridging Gaps

Volunteers and missioners, as Greg's article described, often bridge wide gaps between people. For example, volunteers may initially feel a little distant from those they serve, like Mona who at first felt disconnected with her kids. However, there's a world of wisdom to be gained in noticing how you or fellow volunteers bridge these gaps.

Jesus, himself, was a master at bridging gaps between people. What are some of the social and religious gaps he bridged in his life? If you know the stories below, share what you think are the gaps. It may help to reread the brief scripture passages as a reminder, before sharing your insights into what gaps Jesus bridged, and how he did it.

1. Jesus backs up his disciples - Mark 2:23-28 & Matt. 12:1-8
2. Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman - John 4:5-30
3. Jesus affirms the "last minute" workers' pay - Matthew 20:1-16
4. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners - Matt. 9:9-13

The gaps that we noticed Jesus bridged in these stories: (Did you find others?)

1. religious gap: Good Jews observed the strict prohibition against doing work on the sabbath, yet Jesus approved his disciples' violation of the sabbath law. 2. social and religious gap: Jewish men did not speak with women in public and Jewish men were not allowed to associate with religious heretics (Samaritans). 3. fairness gap: Jesus here seems counter-intuitive, by approving the "fairness" of the same wage, but he is teaching that God is extremely generous toward each person. 4. religious gap: Holy and "clean" people were forbidden to associate with sinners and with despised (rich) tax collectors; but Jesus willingly sat down and had dinner with society's "rejects."

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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during* and *after* their term of service. Local Pallotti Centers are located in Boston, Memphis, Paterson, St. Louis and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' *goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.*

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